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ABSTRACT

This short 3-page article presents four examples of innovative higher education programs that failed because the ideas were imported from other institutions without understanding the substructures that were needed for success. In the first case study, a Writing Across the Curriculum program was implemented through writing-intensive courses instituted in each department, with three courses required for a degree, but administrative support was not forthcoming and teachers received no training in ways to use writing to assist learning. A program was designed to replace the freshman English placement test with a requirement that students accumulate a binder of writing done in high school which would be evaluated for placement. The resources and plans needed for dealing with the thousands of submitted portfolios never materialized, so entering students now place themselves into freshman or remedial English. A university established a writing center but hired, as tutors, graduate teaching assistants who spoke little or no English. A university established a writing examination as a graduation requirement, but so many students taking the test failed that the standards had to be lowered and writing has come to represent a punishment. The article concludes with a formula for failure: Imagine that ideas that work elsewhere will solve problems quickly and inexpensively, without building support and substructures, and without prolonged attention. (JDD)

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Change for the worse.

THE DAMAGE OF INNOVATIONS SET ADRIFT

by Edward M. White

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THE DAMAGE OF INNOVATIONS SET ADRIFT

by Edward M. White

Consider the following four pocket case studies of academic change gone wrong. If you're like me, as you contemplate them—and I assure you that they are not fiction—an overwhelming sadness will come over you. For these are universities in the vanguard, among the small group of well-led colleges that are willing to recognize problems and take innovative steps to deal with them.

These are not the sleepy schools, of which we have too many, that simply keep doing what has always been done, unaware of change within or without their walls. Oh no, my cases represent some strenuous exponents of academic virtue, of energy, of willingness to take risks to achieve worthy ends.

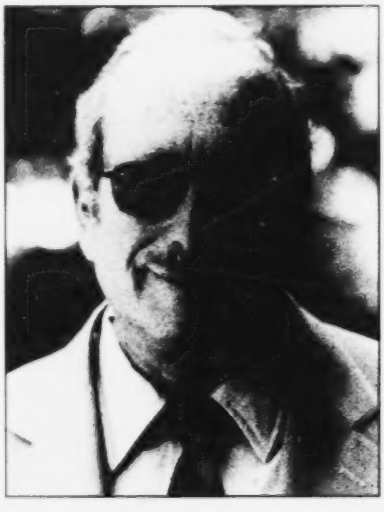
In each case, the universities have wound up worse than before, victims not of their sins but of their virtues. They, like Pip in *Great Expectations*, or like the recipients of the old Chinese curse "May you receive what you wish for," have striven mightily, followed the best models they could find, and have been done in by their best efforts. Better had they done nothing. Alas.

Failure-intensive. A large state university in the East launches itself into Writing Across the Curriculum in a well-publicized attempt to improve the thinking and writing of its graduates. The university senate approves "writing-intensive" (WI) courses to be instituted in each department; three WI courses are required for the degree. The administration promises four kinds of support: a consistent faculty-development program, an improved and supported writing center, enrollment caps of twenty for the WI courses, and a long-term effort to support formative as well as summative assessment of the program.

Five years later, as evaluator of the program, I found the shambles of the ambitious and laudable design.

None of the four administrative promises had been kept. The faculty-development program and the writing center had been sacrificed in a budget cut; a new administration had felt no obligation to the assessment program; and the enrollment caps had been made the responsibility of each department chair, whose budget depended on high enrollments.

At a meeting of those teaching WI courses, I heard that so few WI courses were offered that pressures from the degree requirement had led to average enrollments over fifty, that the faculty were angry and frustrated at being asked to teach writing with no support under such conditions, and that very little writing was going on in the (ironic laughter) writing-intensive [illegible]s. From the department ch[illegible] learned that the weakest teach[illegible]s and the least-attractive courses had been designated "WI," since the requirement ensured survival for both.



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In a devilish twist, faculty teaching non-WI courses had sharply diminished their writing requirements, since their WI colleagues were now supposedly teaching and requiring writing, thereby relieving them of that time-consuming responsibility.

Even the most dedicated WI teachers were doing more harm than good, since they had received no training in ways of using writing to assist learning. One physicist took me aside to tell me that he now devoted many class sessions in his WI course to spelling and punctuation (though he himself had the dimmest understanding of them), despite the demands of the class material and the lack of time to read student writing. I tried hard to praise him for his good will, but when I asked him if he had found a way to teach revision to his students, he looked surprised and puzzled, so I changed the subject.

At a meeting with students, I was not surprised to find that some of them did not know what the "WI" stood for ("work in class"?).

Net result of the new writing program: less writing throughout the curriculum, cynical faculty, mocking students, graduates even less prepared to do critical thinking and writing than before.

Portfolio predicament. A large Midwest state university announ-

ces at a press conference that it is replacing its freshman English placement test with a portfolio requirement. Each of its many thousands of applicants will now need to accumulate a binder of writing done in high school, which will be evaluated to designate the appropriate starting place for their college English studies.

The proposed advantages are clear: Instead of using an artificial, timed, first-draft piece of prose, the university could examine a range of writing of various sorts, including revisions, produced under natural circumstances.

Even better, the high school students would begin to request writing tasks from their teachers (so the students could present fat portfolios), instead of avoiding writing, as they now did, and so the university would be supporting the best instruction in the schools. With enhanced writing instruction in the schools, the university would have few remedial students, and the entire level of education in the state would improve.

Two years later, the thousands of portfolios collected remain unfiled and unread in storage. The resources and plans needed for dealing with the mountain of paper just never materialized, and the university is counting on the short memory of the state's newspaper readers (not to speak of more prominent university scandals) to mitigate its embarrassment over the failed portfolio project.

The previous placement system, dropped with some fanfare, has never been restored, so entering students place themselves into freshman or remedial English, according to their self-confidence. The quality of the freshman writing program has thus dropped sharply, but the part-timers and teaching assistants who handle it have little voice, so no one notices.

Trouble with tutors. A small Midwestern university takes public notice of the fact that its students at all levels, including the graduate, need help with writing and devotes a large part of its capital improvement money to setting up a new writing center. A fine location, light and airy, is found in the library and equipped with several dozen tutorial stations, each with a computer and several kinds of software. After a strenuous national search, a skilled director for the center is hired; he has more prestigious job offers, but the new facility is irresistible.

Two years later, the writing center remains gleaming and empty in its favored location. There has been one slight slipup in the budget allocations: The money to hire tutors for the center was allotted to the school deans, who (it was felt) would be in a better position to identify tutors than a brand-new center director.

At a meeting with students, I was not surprised to find that some of them did not know what the "WI" stood for ("work in class"?).

But, the deans had their own pressing problem, related to the center, which they used the new funds to solve: complaints about graduate teaching assistants who spoke no, or next to no, English. What could be more natural than to appoint these foreign graduate students, many of them impoverished, as paid writing center tutors?

Unfortunately, the needy undergraduates who showed up for help on their freshman themes and upper-division term papers found tutors without English pronunciation, syntax, or vocabulary, and never returned. The director of the center is looking for a new job. The library is requesting the return of square footage it can use.

Examination frustration. A large public university in the West is charged by the trustees to certify the writing proficiency of its graduates—specifically at the upper-division level, since a large percentage of those graduates are transfers from community colleges.

In a spirit of enthusiasm, buttressed by a survey that showed most faculty to be distressed at the low writing ability of graduating seniors, the university establishes an upper-division writing examination as a graduation requirement. The exam is carefully constructed, contains both multiple-choice and essay portions, and is intelligently administered and scored.

The advantages proposed are many: The university will assert, through the exam, that writing is important; and undergraduates, realizing that they cannot graduate without demonstrating writing proficiency at a high level, will seek out courses that demand writing from them. The entire level of reading, writing, and thinking will improve as these standards become clear.

But problems begin to arise the first year of the test. Despite all attempts to set a low passing score (within reason!), close to 60 percent of those taking the test fail. The students are quick to point out that most of them have done no writing since freshman composition class, so, naturally, they write worse than they did as freshmen. The test is hastily called "experimental" that year, and the program continued, in the expectation that things will improve as the requirement becomes known.

Five years later, the required graduation writing test is an established part of the university program, but its standards have continued to sink, until now it is rather less demanding than the freshman placement test.

Nonetheless, a substantial group of near-graduates haunts the campus, repeaters without end, hoping that lightning will strike and they will somehow pass the stupid test that stands between them and their degree. Some of them have failed more than a dozen times, and the college coursework they completed to the praise of their instructors is becoming an increasingly remote memory. Quite a few of them are non-native speakers of English; some of them simply die inside when the test questions are handed out and cannot write anything at all.

In the weeks before the test, fly-by-night test-preparation firms plaster the campus with fliers advertising their superior tutoring records. One or two of these prof-

itable enterprises suggest through their guarantees that they supply substitute test-takers for the right price.

The test has become an established bureaucratic operation, with a staff and budget that rivals any instructional program. Prime concerns are security of the test and statistical purity in the scoring of it. Much talk on campus has to do with the test: for students, somehow passing it; for faculty, defending it as a badge of righteousness; for administrators, maintaining it in the face of increasing pressures, which they interpret as attacks on standards. As for writing, well, nobody talks about writing, or writing instruction, or writing as learning, as thinking, as creativity. Everybody talks about getting the test "out of the way," so students can graduate.

There is no evidence, not even anecdotal evidence, that writing has improved on campus. To the contrary, writing has come to represent a punishment, rather like it is for the grade school students whose teacher threatens, "If you kids don't quiet down, you'll have to write a thousand words!"

What Went Wrong

There is more to learn from this catalog of disaster than what Dr. Johnson called "the vanity of human wishes." For in each case the innovation had been adopted because it had been notably successful elsewhere. None was an example of change for the sake of change, movement instead of progress, or faddishness.

Writing Across the Curriculum and writing centers are established and important features of many successful institutional programs, and assessment (including portfolio assessment) is valuable precisely because it does bring about the kinds of change these institutions hoped to achieve. It would be easy, and even routine, to point to cases of highly successful uses of each of the innovations I have described; the literature is replete with such show-and-tell.

In fact, my cases illustrate the power of these innovations in a perverse way: They can be strong forces for ill as well as for good. What went wrong?

I think in each case we can see the problems caused by importing even excellent ideas from other institutions without understanding the substructures that allow the ideas to flourish. To import the innovation without establishing and maintaining a new substructure is rather like building a hydroelectric plant in the desert: Without the energy source it won't work, and building it damages the environment. Better not to attempt it at all. We need not spend much time reviewing the particular cases, since, in each instance, the idea was set adrift on campus without the necessary substructure.

Undergraduates who showed up for help found tutors without English pronunciation, syntax, or vocabulary, and never returned.

The writing-intensive program on the Eastern campus is the best illustration: Without faculty development, faculty in the disciplines can teach only what they already know about writing (which isn't much); without small classes, faculty cannot assign and respond to writing; without a writing center, faculty and students with writing problems are at sea without a life raft; without assessment, expensive programs cannot demonstrate their value.

The need for these supports was apparent when the program began, but shifting budgets and administrators led to their abandonment. The institution went wrong by setting up the entire program before its supports had become institutionalized. The course requirement should have followed the establishment of the faculty-development program and the writing center, and should have been made contingent on their continuation. The university failed to envision the program as a whole, including the supports, and thought only of the requirement, as if it could take care of itself.

The portfolio fiasco is similar, since the support system dropped away, leaving the innovation naked and helpless. But here, disaster was predictable. Instead of starting slowly with small groups, developing systems and budgets, building portfolios (with all of their power) into the academic culture, the university went for the big splash and got mud all over itself.

The writing center with the non-English-speaking tutors seems (and is!) comic from the outside but supremely sad on campus. It would seem easy enough to rescue the tutorial budget from the deans who diverted it from its purpose, but the campus culture is such that only a new administration could make such a move, and it would be interpreted as an attack upon the deans themselves.

And finally, the graduation writing test exemplifies the replacement of goals by means, perhaps the most common perversion of educational innovation through assessment. Instead of supporting writing instruction and improvement, the test has replaced them; instead of symbolizing university commitment to improved thinking and writing, the test has become an empty hurdle to be gotten over or around.

To be sure, the only foolproof formula to keep educational innovation from becoming institutional embarrassment is to avoid all change, and die in place, without being aware of the fact. (The prime minister was given good news and bad news: "The king is dead, and it's your job to tell him so.") Sometimes things go awry no matter how well we may plan. Those who are willing to take risks certainly deserve praise, since there is no way to achieve success without risking failure.

But this article is about failure, not success, and about the clear signs that predict failure for an educational innovation that looks good. And there is a sure formula for failure: Imagine that ideas that work elsewhere will solve your problems quickly and inexpensively, without building support and substructures, without prolonged attention. Without substructures, built with care on campus, the new idea will fail.

Innovations set adrift are dangerous to all navigation. ■